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## The importance of differentiation for the struggling reader

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## The importance of differentiation for the struggling reader

### Abstract

Learning to read is a journey, and the first steps of this journey are among the most important. It is critical for struggling readers to have support and encouragement as they overcome the various obstacles they face. Not all young readers have the same background knowledge and sufficient skills to be proficient. Teachers play a vital role in supporting these students. First grade especially is a critical step on this path. A poor reader will continue to struggle and lose interest without the necessary guidance. This paper will detail the necessity of assisting the struggling reader in the first grade classroom with particular focus on the role of differentiation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENTIATION FOR THE STRUGGLING READER

A Graduate Review

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Division of Elementary Education

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Christine M. Troyer

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**This Review by: Christine M. Troyer**

**Titled: The Importance of Reading for the Struggling Reader**

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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### Abstract

Learning to read is a journey, and the first steps of this journey are among the most important. It is critical for struggling readers to have support and encouragement as they overcome the various obstacles they face. Not all young readers have the same background knowledge and sufficient skills to be proficient. Teachers play a vital role in supporting these students. First grade especially is a critical step on this path. A poor reader will continue to struggle and lose interest without the necessary guidance. This paper will detail the necessity of assisting the struggling reader in the first grade classroom with particular focus on the role of differentiation.

## Introduction

First grade has an enormous impact on the future readers in our society (Snow, Burns, Griffin, 1998; Mathes, Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, Francis, & Schatschneider, 2005). Young students learn skills at an early age which enable them throughout their literary journeys. Without this solid foundation, children can become discouraged and “turned off” from the joys of reading. Research by Juel (1998) indicated that if a student was a poor reader in first grade they will likely remain a poor reader into and through fourth grade. First grade is an especially critical stage for these students. They are being exposed to the world of books and print for the first time. Their initial methods of reading and interpreting will carry them through their entire adult life. Students are not reading to learn, but simply learning how to read at this stage. Consequently, students at this age are particularly vulnerable to obstacles which hinder their reading progress.

This problem is intensified with struggling readers. Research has shown that first graders who show task avoidance tendencies often carry these traits into third grade and beyond (Morgan, Farkas, Tufis, & Sperling, 2008). The same research indicates poor task engagement is the single greatest factor connecting to poor reading skills. Students who struggle with their attentiveness, organization, and learning independence are often the same students who struggle to demonstrate proficiency in reading. By examining how differentiated instruction can be used to target struggling readers, this paper will illuminate the teacher’s role in a diverse, 21<sup>st</sup> Century classroom.

The job of a diligent first grade teacher is both to identify these challenged students and to adapt instruction to reach their diverse learning needs (Snow et al., 1998). There has been a great deal of relevant research on this topic, ranging from best practice strategies to classroom

theories and practices. Many theories have been proposed for student achievement, with some showing greater potential for success. However, studies have also shown that no one approach is perfect. Rather, teachers should implement the intervention that meets the specific needs of their students (Mathes et al., 2005). This gives teachers a powerful voice in deciding which method to implement in their classrooms. Additionally, if a teacher has input into the strategies that are being chosen, they will more fully implement the intervention and give it needed support (Mathes et al., 2005). This requires teachers to be flexible and knowledgeable about the theories and practices that are available to them and willing to try ideas that at first may seem foreign and unfamiliar to them.

It is ironic that, while classrooms are seeing their most diverse population in history, special programs to deal with this diversity are diminishing (Ivey, 2000). This diversity is manifest in numerous ways. These factors include everything from racial and gender dynamics to economic and social stratification (Morgan et al., 2008). Differentiated instruction is critical in meeting the needs of first grade readers. Teachers rely on observation, interest inventories, and grouping for instruction to make sure that each student is being challenged at an appropriate level (Cooper, Chard, & Kiger, 2006). Students must be consistently engaged and confident that they are in a safe learning environment; otherwise, their progress may be impeded and their confidence weakened. When students do not feel connected to the classroom and school they cannot be successful learners (Gregory & Kuzmich, 2005).

The key to making differentiated instruction work is to objectively compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of each student addressing their specific needs (Carolan & Guinn, 2007). This strategy is nothing new, with the historical one-room schoolhouse being an obvious example of each child working at his or her own pace (Tomlinson, 1999). Teachers must keep



these various issues in mind as they develop and implement instructional strategies to reach all learners they come into contact with.

### *Rationale*

I have chosen to review the literature regarding differentiation with emphasis on the struggling reader. I have personally been searching for ways to enhance the reading instruction in my first grade classroom. Currently, I have several students reading below grade level. My struggling students work with me during small group, meet with the remedial reading teacher, a classroom volunteer, and the classroom reading associate. They also have many literacy center choices to help them work on their reading skills. I am conducting this literature analysis to become more knowledgeable about the struggling first grade reader and strategies to assist my students. My hope is to become more comfortable with this topic and use my newfound knowledge to develop better practices in my profession.

### *Statement of Purpose*

The purpose of this study is to focus on the struggling first grade reader and what components are needed to help him or her succeed. Added focus will be given to differentiated instruction as a useful intervention. The following questions will be addressed to achieve these purposes.

1. Why do some first graders struggle when learning to read?
2. What key reading components do struggling readers need?

Several essential terms will be used throughout this literature review. It is important to provide a clear understanding of the struggling reader and differentiation. These words are often misleading to the casual reader.

### *Definition of Terms*

1. *Differentiated Instruction*: According to Tomlinson & McTighe (2006), Focuses on whom we teach, where we teach, and how we teach. Its primary goal is ensuring that teachers focus on processes and procedures that ensure effective learning for varied individuals (p.3).
2. *Intervention*: According to Cooper, Chard, & Kiger (2006), Providing instruction to struggling readers to stop further failure and help them make adequate yearly progress (p. 200).
3. *Struggling Reader*: According to Cooper, Chard, & Kiger (2006), Any reader who is not reading fluently and with good comprehension in grade-level material (p. 202).
4. *Phonemic Awareness*: According to Cooper, Chard, & Kiger (2006), The ability to hear and produce the separate sounds in a word and to blend separate sounds into words (p. 201).

### *Significance of the Study*

Reading is a critical part of the first grade experience. Students should leave their first grade year with the foundation for a lifelong thirst for knowledge. It is critical as educators that each of us provide all students, regardless of skill level, with the tools necessary for this success. This topic is important to me as an educator, because I want each of my students to have a positive attitude towards reading. There has been an enormous amount of study on reading and differentiated instruction on nearly every aspect of the struggling reader. My goal through this review is to incorporate the most effective modes of instruction for my classroom, so my students will be actively engaged.

## Methodology

I reviewed several sources to get an understanding of struggling first grade readers and differentiated instruction. It was important for me to first construct a basic understanding of what the professional literature contains. I was able to augment my background knowledge with a review of the resources at hand. The first topic addressed in this chapter is the methods for locating all sources for this literature review. This will be followed by the methods I used to select sources and procedures used to analyze sources.

I began this journey by visiting the Rod Library at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) to study educational journals for a relevant topic. This led me in the general direction of differentiated instruction, which has always been of prime interest to me. It is relevant to my profession as a first grade teacher and provides a wealth of material to study and implement. After selecting the general topic, I was quickly forced to narrow my search, due to the overwhelming number of resources at hand. After reading and reviewing several topics, I decided to focus on the struggling reader.

My search continued in a new direction as I studied subjects including struggling readers, at-risk readers, beginning readers, and first grade reading topics. I also did a search on reading strategies. My search carried me to the IRTS Lab at UNI, the Waverly Public Library, Wartburg College, and I was able to take advantage of interlibrary loans and the on-line catalogue. After I located a number of workable articles, the bibliographies assisted me in widening my search. I quickly collected a sizable binder of articles to read and review, each of which gave me new ideas and directions for my study.

My primary requirement for the articles I used was that they covered issues related to first grade since that is my field. I also was partial to the articles that listed interventions for

struggling readers. I attempted to focus on current research; however, I also utilized specific “classic” studies that have shaped the field. A strategy that worked for me was using post-it notes to identify authors I had previously read. I was able to reference that list whenever I came across a new author to see if I had previously examined their work. As my list of authors widened, I found myself with a treasure trove of information to digest.

I proceeded to analyze the literature using several methods. I studied each heading to make sure it functioned as a primary source. I would first preview the article to get a basic overview of its contents. I would then return to the article for an in-depth reading, highlighting the major points and issues addressed. I also focused on finding possible quotes for my paper during this stage of my study. I used a highlighter to mark major points and quotes and sorted these articles by subjects into a binder. These subjects included class size, interventions, differentiated instruction, phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, student motivation, and tutoring.

### Literature Review

This portion of the literature review will identify reasons why some students struggle when learning to read. Areas of focus will include practice time, characteristics of learners, lack of differentiation, and limited writing skills. Special attention will be paid to the various components to assist struggling readers. These key concepts include: vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, motivation, and tutoring. It is important to examine this literature to gain a greater understanding of the needs of struggling readers.

#### *Why do Some First Graders Struggle When Learning to Read?*

Schools today are faced with many struggles and challenges involving their students. One of the greatest is the task of giving all students equal opportunity, regardless of background.

Some students come into the classroom with a great deal of experience in hearing stories and sometimes even reading the stories themselves. Other students have little if any previous exposure to the written word. This does not guarantee they will struggle, but studies indicate that those with limited exposure are at greater risk for future struggles. Students that come from lower-income families are especially at risk for this type of struggle (Snow et al., 1998). Rasinski and Padak (2001) related that “Regardless of the reason for the struggle, these children need all the support we can provide” (p. 182). According to (Snow et al., 1998):

Children who are particularly likely to have difficulty learning to read in the primary grades are those who begin school with less prior knowledge and skill in certain domains, most notably letter knowledge, phonological sensitivity, familiarity with the basic purposes and mechanisms of reading, and language ability. (p.137)

Students who have this previous experience with language, both in literature and verbal discussions, are usually more prepared for classroom work. The benefits are nearly endless, and include a stronger vocabulary and understanding of story structure (Juel, 1988). This experience ties into the overall background knowledge of the student. The more a student reads the more background knowledge they acquire to help them in further reading (Walker, 1992). The struggling reader misses out on this background knowledge, which in turn leads to less reading and less background knowledge. This cycle is difficult to break out of, but essential to fostering fluent readers (Jenkins, Vadasy, Firebaugh, & Profilet, 2000).

The sooner a potential struggling reader can be identified, the more chances educators have to assist them. It is important to give these students the proper foundation for reading. This can include everything from learning the sounds of the language to hearing a story read to them. Cooper, Chard, & Kiger (2006) found, “There is a greater likelihood that potential struggling readers will not develop into struggling readers if they are given quality core instruction, and

prevention and intervention when the signs indicate the need” (p.13). These potential struggling readers must be encouraged at every opportunity to read, and every effort must be made to make it an enjoyable experience. These students need to feel success in their reading and be able to take ownership for their own improvement. The more they rely on their teachers for help, the more difficult it will be for them to discover their own solutions.

*Practice time.* Struggling readers need large chunks of time practicing literature that they can successfully read with comprehension (Allington, 2006). Research by Allington (2006) indicated that struggling students read less during the school day than their higher-achieving peers. This is due in part to schedule conflicts such as interruptions from other teachers and parents, related arts schedules, and student pull outs. The daily schedule in a typical elementary classroom includes countless distractions and interruptions. For these struggling readers, however, it is more difficult to focus their energy and a challenge to harness their attention span. They are less able to cope with the distractions, which makes the time they spend reading in the classroom less effective.

*Characteristics of learners.* It is useful here to discuss the characteristics of whom we are referring. Who actually are these struggling readers? They would include students who are:

1. more likely to be reading material that is difficult for them,
2. more likely to be asked to read aloud,
3. more likely to be interrupted when they miscall a word,
4. more likely to be interrupted more quickly,
5. more likely to pause and wait for a teacher to prompt them, and
6. more likely to be told to sound out a word when interrupted (Allington, 2006, p.94).

Struggling readers, therefore, deal with a number of struggles in the classroom. These include interruptions that teachers might allow with good intentions. Teachers might think they are helping the student, while in reality this time away from task is detrimental to their learning. It also might suppress their motivation and drive to learn. It is also useful to note that these students may become dependent upon the teacher or their fellow students every time they struggle with a word or pronunciation. Teachers need to find practical ways to guide these students into discovering their own ways of finding a solution. This can be time-consuming and a struggle to a teacher who is looking for a “quick fix.” However, the long-term benefits of this individual work are clear.

Research by Cooper, Chard, & Kiger (2006) stated, “Struggling readers typically need more practice than non-struggling readers” (p.144). The challenge for the teacher is to provide this practice time while keeping the student motivated and involved in reading. This practice time should include actual reading time with appropriate material geared to their level. Several steps are important to support students who struggle when learning to read. In order for struggling readers to become successful, they must take ownership if they are to eventually become competent readers (Mathes et al., 2005). The student must feel ownership of their work if they are to reach their maximum reading potential. Additional work by Cooper, Chard, & Kiger (2006) stated, “The goal is to get struggling readers to use the skills, strategies, and processes on their own as they read” (p.15).

This is also a struggle for teachers because there is not ‘one best approach’ to meet the needs of struggling readers (Mathes et al., 2005, p.179). Each case is a little bit different and involves a different set of skills and approaches. Teachers need to be open and willing to try different practices and strategies to reach the individual student and their needs. The key is to

match readers to appropriate reading materials and interventions (Mathes et al., 2005). By doing this we will set up the student for future success by giving them an attainable goal they can reach in their reading journey.

Researchers Mathes et al. (2005) state, "There are several key factors that are important to keep in mind when planning an intervention: phonological awareness, phonological decoding, fluency both with words in isolation and in context, and comprehension of the text" (p.178). All of these factors play a role in the intervention. A teacher can have some flexibility in how they approach these areas, but should not ignore any of them. In addition, a variety of methods must be explored to gain the greatest benefit.

*Lack of differentiation.* Differentiation comes into play as teachers look for ways to serve the needs of their students. Work by Schumm, Moody, and Vaughn (2000) revealed that some reading students are taught whole class and any work to differentiate even within the traditional three reading groups was nonexistent. When teachers do differentiate the curriculum, students will have a better opportunity to learn when they actually have reading material at their level and within their realm of interest. Teachers think that this will create more work but in reality it is what teaching is all about (Carolan & Guinn, 2007). It is difficult for teachers to differentiate or modify the curriculum when there are only a few materials at hand with which to work from. However, it does not make sense to have a student read something far above their reading level because they will not be able to comprehend the text and will lead to confusion and discouragement. Teachers need to understand their students at any given time in their development. This is what differentiation is all about (Tomlinson, 2008).

Differentiation is wholly tied to assessment. A teacher must be constantly assessing each student to see where they fall in their learning skills to make differentiation possible. In research



by Tomlinson (1999) it was claimed that assessment for differentiation is to provide information on a student's learning skills and development. A teacher in a differentiated classroom is not just concerned with summative assessments; rather, they look for how they can modify future lessons to better reach the student.

These types of assessments are a valuable tool for teachers to use throughout their curriculum. All teachers realize that not every student in their classroom learns the same way. The challenge is to find practical ways to modify their teaching strategies to become more effective. Assessments are to be used to accomplish this. It can be as simple as listening to a child read and hearing them struggle with a certain sound or word. It can be through the questions asked during small group reading time or during a class presentation. It can even be with a certain key concept which much of the class struggles with, even after it has been presented in the class.

Some teachers might shy away from this approach, feeling it is too much of a challenge and will take too much time out of their day. However, differentiation is only effective if it is used consistently. Tomlinson notes that no teacher can differentiate everything all the time in the classroom. Instead, teachers need to be smart and efficient in what they do. "Effective differentiated classrooms include many times in which whole-class, nondifferentiated fare is the order of the day" (Tomlinson, 1999, p.11). These modifications should be done if a teacher feels there is a need, or that it will benefit the students in the room. Differentiation is not the only solution, but is a valuable part of any classroom.

The subject of differentiation is especially important in regards to the struggling reader. These readers often bring specific needs, as well as unique social characteristics, into the classroom. Because all students learn to read at a different pace, it is important for the successful

teacher to be flexible in their teaching. There must be a constant lookout for techniques and approaches that are working, and for gaps in understanding that need to be addressed. Flexibility is a key word with differentiation. Tomlinson writes that everything from seating arrangements to scheduling can play a role in differentiation. If a teacher can find the correct set of circumstances for the student, their learning will improve.

Respect will also be nurtured in this type of environment. Students are quick to understand whether a teacher is willing and able to do what is best for them in the classroom. If a student believes their teacher is working for them, they will be more likely to follow the suggestions and guidance of the instructor. By giving each student this type of individual care, a stronger relationship will be cultivated and the classroom will benefit. Tomlinson (2008) makes the point that differentiation gives teachers the tools to actively support each student by cultivating a manner of trust.

According to Tomlinson & McTighe (2006), certain characteristics can be found with a teacher that practices these ideas. The teachers in such classrooms:

1. Use a variety of strategies when they present to the class as well as when students are actively engaged in learning.
2. Use strategies that enable them to address readiness, interest, and learning profile needs.
3. Guide students in understanding how to work with instructional approaches effectively.
4. Help students reflect on which strategies work well for them, why that might be the case, and what that reveals to the student about him- or her-self as a learner

(Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006, p. 53).

The successful teacher will find ways to incorporate these methods into the daily life of the class. It is to be stressed that these are not things to disrupt the classroom. Instead, these strategies should seamlessly be incorporated into the environment. The more that these strategies are able to flow through the routine, the more successful they will be.

Differentiation is also a valuable tool because it encourages reflection, both by the teacher and the student. The teacher will become more aware of his or her practices, and make judgments on what works best. However, these strategies should also lead to more reflective time for the individual student. Finding strategies that work will give the student extra confidence and understanding into their role in the class and attaining their learning goals.

It should also be noted that differentiation is not just a tool to help the students that are struggling to learn. The benefits for the advanced learner are also significant. Teachers must be aware of the students that quickly understand the material, and are looking for new challenges to explore (Tomlinson, 1999). Teachers must be willing and able to provide these new challenges, so their high-achieving students will continue to learn. These students are often forgotten about or even ignored, since they can accomplish most classroom tasks easily. The teacher usually needs the time to help the struggling learners. However, these quick learners are at risk to become bored and lethargic if not given challenging work to their level. In the first grade classroom, this might include trying more advanced books or giving them a new project to accomplish in some area they are interested in. All of this is part of the teacher's responsibility to respond to the needs of all learners.

*Limited writing skills.* It is important to note that as students compose a story they are indeed reading as well. Reading and writing go hand in hand. In work by Calkins (1983) she noted that as students write, they are continually reading.

They read to savor the sounds of their language, they read to see what they had written, they read to regain momentum, they read to reorient themselves, they read to avoid writing. They read to find gaps in their work, they read to evaluate whether the piece was working, they read to edit. And they read to share the work of their hands. (p.153)

As students explore their writing muse, they will inevitably be practicing their reading skills. This in turn will make them more confident writers.

### *What Key Reading Components do Struggling Readers Need?*

A critical beginning component that is successful for struggling readers is the idea of phonological awareness. This is a person's awareness of how words sound in a language (Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 1994). This is especially critical in the first grade year, because by the middle of first grade most students have acquired this skill (Cooper, Chard, & Kiger, 2006). Students at this age are just beginning to connect sounds to the symbols on a page, and discovering how to translate them into words. Most students at this age have already learned the sounds that are linked to each letter of the alphabet (Cooper, Chard, & Kiger, 2006). Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte (1994) strongly recommend that, "Training in phonological awareness be included in any preventive or remedial program for children either at-risk for or identified with reading disabilities." This will help to bolster the struggling reader's abilities, and also hopefully prevent further struggles.

First grade classrooms include lots of discussion and chatter. This is vital to building the student's awareness of their language and how to communicate with their peers. Cooper, Chard, & Kiger (2006) indicated that these successful classrooms should have noise and talk, because this is what the students are using to construct their learning to. So what might be seen as confusion and chaos to an observer is actually part of the overall effort to teach students communication skills.

Ironically, with all of the studies on struggling readers, it has been found that many teachers are not using best teaching practices. Research by Chard and Kameenui (2000) discovered that students were not receiving the types of help and assistance they needed to become better readers. The researchers noted a great variability in how teachers handled these issues. This was documented by studying how often students were reading in the classroom and the basic and non-challenging activities given to them to complete. In research conducted by (Cooper, Chard, & Kiger, 2006) it was discovered that struggling students should be screened and monitored twice as often as non-struggling readers to observe their progress. In research done by O'Connor (2000) she noted that students receiving interventions in phonological skills and word reading early in first grade and phonological and decoding and spelling toward the end of first grade showed greater results than students who did not participate in these types of interventions (p. 51).

*Vocabulary.* Another key component is vocabulary. The more words a reader can automatically recognize, the more time they will have to spend on meaning. The concept of vocabulary is a great challenge for the struggling reader (Cooper, Chard, & Kiger, 2006).

Struggling readers often find that gaining vocabulary is difficult, which makes the prospect of reading all the more daunting. This can occur from a number of causes, including physical or environmental conditions, as well as simple oral language ability. The end result is that struggling readers have to work harder at something that other students simply take for granted (Cooper, Chard, & Kiger, 2006). This expended energy is being wasted, when it should be allowed to be used on understanding meaning.

According to Stanovich (1986), "The very children who read well and who have good vocabularies will read more, learn more word meanings, and hence read even better" (p. 381).

Rasinski and Padak (2001) found that "Having a large sight vocabulary doesn't guarantee reading success, but it certainly helps. The more words a reader knows by sight, the fewer times he or she will need to stop reading to figure out unknown words" (p. 98). Students who struggle with their vocabulary are not able to achieve any kind of rhythm in their reading, which limits the enjoyment of the activity.

*Comprehension.* Allington (2006) stated that comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading. If the student is unable to comprehend the words they are reading, the entire purpose of reading is lost. Cooper, Chard and Kiger (2006) add that when there is not comprehension, one is simply making sounds without any greater purpose.

It is a fallacy to assume that comprehension is simply an extension of intelligence. Studies have shown that comprehension involves active thinking, which can be significantly improved through effective teaching. It is important to realize that comprehension strategies often take time in the classroom, and students benefit from having strong instructional support. This is not an issue that can be quickly fixed or solved, but the long-term benefits are limitless. Allington (2006) stated it isn't enough to demonstrate an effective reading strategy to students. The students must be given numerous chances to apply these strategies in their own reading. It is the combination of teaching and utilizing the strategies that ultimately produce comprehension in the student's mind.

Allington (2006) discussed several useful strategies, including activating prior knowledge, summarizing, story grammar lessons, imagery, question generating and thinking aloud (p. 122). These strategies all play a role in sharpening the comprehension process and helping to make meaning for students. Walker (1992) added that it is vital for teachers to demonstrate and instruct students in how to successfully utilize these strategies.

Teachers can use comprehension strategy instruction to help students become more active readers. This also gives the student more ownership of their comprehension. Students can be taught to use these strategies but a teacher must fully understand their usefulness before being able to share with the reader. One particularly useful teaching technique is explicit instruction. *The Put Reading First* publication (2001) suggests that explicit instruction involves the teacher explaining why a certain strategy would be effective, and when to implement them in reading activities. This gives the student clear guidance into the process of comprehension, without a teacher simply stating rules that need to be followed. Snow et al., (1998) reiterated this idea, saying that reading instruction should include explicit guidance on strategies that are used to understand the text. These can be read to the students, or the teacher can allow the student to read these instructions themselves.

*Fluency.* Fluency is a key to successful reading. Fluent readers are able to make sense of the text by linking what they read to the strategies they use (Walker, 1992). Research from the publication *Put Reading First* stated that a fluent reader is able to automatically understand what they are reading, and are able to focus their efforts on understanding the deeper meanings. A non-fluent reader, on the other hand, is forced to expend all their energy just trying to read the individual words. Fluency can be seen as experiencing the text, while non-fluent readers are hindered from this relationship. Fluency is discovered in the classroom by students reading aloud, with the teacher monitoring comprehension. Teachers are unable to gain access to the student's struggles during silent reading time. Only when teachers are listening can they provide correction and guidance for the student (Vadasy & Sanders, 2008). Some students might be comfortable asking for an explanation of meaning, while other students will simply read the

words and move on. Teachers must be prepared to ask questions and carefully work with individual readers to see if fluency is occurring.

One method that is useful for teachers is promoting whisper reading. This gives the teacher the opportunity to listen to each child individually, while the students are engrossed in their stories (Cooper, Chard, & Kiger, 2006). Rasinski and Padak (2001) claim that "If we want students to become fluent readers, they need a model of what fluent oral reading sounds like so that they can develop an awareness of the importance of fluent reading" (p. 162).

It is common sense that the more we do of something the better we become at it. This is also true in reading. It is this "practice makes perfect" approach which is useful for the students. The more they become familiar with the material and process, the more successful they become. (Cooper, Chard, & Kiger, 2006). Rasinski and Padak (2001) suggested the use of repeated readings to accomplish this practice. The passage needs to be short in length with poetry being a perfect fit. The research indicated that using poetry would improve students' overall fluency by giving them rhyming words and short lines to decipher.

*Motivation.* There are many reasons why students might not be motivated to read. Some are more visual in their learning, and others just find the practice of reading to be tedious. Effective teachers are able to find unique and diverse ways to motivate their students into the world of reading. For the struggling reader, this is compounded because when students struggle with reading in first grade they likely will choose to stop reading altogether due to the difficulties they encounter (Juel, 1988).

It is vital for parents and teachers to provide opportunities to read. Rasinski and Padak (2001) recommend:

That in order to maximize students' reading as well as their satisfaction with and motivation for reading, teachers and parents should create conditions in the classroom



and home that will inspire students to read, for their own purpose as well as those assigned by the teacher. This means having plenty of engaging, authentic materials for literacy in the classroom, creating a pleasant and safe environment for reading, talking about reading and writing often, reading to students regularly, encouraging students to read and write, recommending books, and celebrating students' reading and writing. (p.3)

This means that the teacher or parent should remain positive, giving praise when necessary and frequently reminding the child of why reading is so important.

Modeling is also an effective technique for nurturing good reading habits. Rasinski and Padak (2001) suggested that adults need to model being engaging and lifelong readers (p.3).

Why should children take the time to read effectively when the adults they see rarely have time for the activity? "A teacher's enthusiasm for an activity contributes to its allure and enjoyment," (Rasinski & Padak, 2001, p. 178). Snow et al., (1998) added that children who witness their parents enjoying a book will be far more motivated to read, even if they struggle at first. And Walker (1992) stated that a child's family will be a major role model for any struggling student to witness and learn from. Habits, both good and bad, are easily shared with students and reading is one of the best habits that can be spread.

Choosing the right types of books is another factor in motivation. Books and stories need to be age-appropriate, with content that will garner enthusiasm with the child. Teachers need to be flexible, and realize that the books that might have interested them as a child might not hold the same allure to a modern, 21<sup>st</sup> century student. Children usually are attracted to what is new. Broaddus and Bloodgood (1999) state that a child's motivation will greatly increase when newer books are accessible. If students are able to choose their own books, they will take more ownership in the process. Wirt, Bryan, and Wesley (2005) argue that the top motivator for students to read more is to be able to choose their own books. This is another example of how

teachers need to be flexible, with students not always selecting the story or book a teacher might wish.

Teachers should not take age-appropriateness to an extreme, however. If a child is motivated to read a certain book, encouragement should be freely given. Sometimes a child will try to read a book beyond their limited means. Their motivation will take them so far into the process, and then they struggle. Freppon and McIntyre (1999) have discovered that children will bravely interact with a text, even when the text is very difficult for them to comprehend. The key is to not let the child become discouraged and to monitor their progress with praise and assistance when needed. There should always be other choices available for reading, if a certain book or story is not readily enjoyed.

Students will usually trust their teachers to provide appropriate material to read. Tomlinson (2008) stated that a student must think a teacher is on their side before they will trust them. If a student believes this to be the case, it will be easier for the teacher to guide the student into appropriate reading patterns.

Parents and teachers must work together in this process. One cannot accomplish their goal without the other's support. It is true, as Gregory and Kuzmich (2005) wrote that teachers are an influence on a student during the school day. Without the support at home, however, much of this influence will be wasted, or at the very least limited. Conversations between parents and teachers should be open and friendly, with ideas shared and discussed for the good of the student.

Motivation is a tricky issue, because every student has a different set of needs and desires. A teacher will not be able to succeed alone. It takes the support of others as well. "Effective teachers realize the importance of inviting the home and community into the

classroom,” (Rasinski & Padak, 2001, p. 178). It is exactly this type of support that will help lead a struggling reader into greater proficiency.

*Tutoring.* Elementary teachers have a hundred details to focus on every day. For students that need extra support and guidance, a tutor is essential. Tutors can especially help with reading fluency, by simply listening to the student read and pointing out connections that the child might not at first realize. For the intervention to be successful, tutors must be carefully trained and monitored by the educational supervisor. This ensures that the student is gaining appropriate feedback and help with their reading. The key to any tutoring is the individualized instruction given to the student (Jenkins et al., 2000). Rasinski and Padak (2001) wrote that for example:

Tutors and children can play word games together, or the tutor can listen to the child read a poem, dictated account, or pattern book. Most children can make considerable progress in reading if their strong classroom program is supplemented with the extra opportunities that one-on-one tutoring can provide. (p. 183)

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this review of literature was to learn about struggling first grade readers, how to identify them, and the key components to help them succeed. I was interested in this topic because my classroom contains many children who struggle when learning to read. I wanted to find out how to best serve these struggling readers and to ensure I was utilizing best instructional practices for these students.

Being a teacher in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century contains many rewards and frustrations that all professionals share. There is a greater amount of pressure placed upon teachers than any other time in the educational field. I want to utilize best teaching practices to ensure that my students have the best first grade experience they can. My students will only have the opportunity to be in

first grade once. Part of the first grade experience is learning to read. First grade can truly be seen as a foundational year for the student. What they will be learning during those nine months will prepare them for nearly everything to follow in the next dozen years or more. A slow start or extended struggle will hinder this necessary growth. The issue is intensified with learning to read, which connects to everything else learned.

From the moment the students enter the first grade door there is an excitement for learning to read. For the struggling reader their motivation, experience, and skills may be limited. My role is to ensure that all of my first graders are given the support and encouragement needed to be a lifelong reader. Juel (1996) found that:

In order for first graders to become better readers they needed four forms of activities and interactions. They would include: (a) reading text that provided multiple repetitions of the same words and word families, (b) receiving direct instruction about the letter-sound relationships within words, (c) being helped to identify and spell words through numerous tutor-scaffolded interactions, and (d) hearing the tutor's words as that tutor modeled how to identify or spell unknown words. (p. 288)

The review of literature in this study supports the ideas of giving students choice, appropriate reading materials that are of interest, large chunks of practice time, explicit instruction, and much needed support for success. It is important to note that there is not a one size fits all method or approach to assist struggling readers. The literature has given me the vital tools needed to assist my first grade struggling readers. I plan to assess all of my students in phonological awareness and monitor their progress in learning to read. I have learned that I must meet the needs of all learners in the classroom and provide opportunities for reading. These opportunities can be formal or informal but should be consistently offered and used every day. The practice that these students get in their reading will reinforce other branches of learning and hopefully excite them into new worlds and ideas. Differentiation plays a huge role in assisting

the struggling reader. Classrooms must have a sense of differentiation, where individual talents and interests are cultivated. Teachers must be flexible and willing to try a variety of methods, discarding what doesn't work and investigating what does work. This will lead to a greater sense of community, as the students realize their potential. My hope is to become the best teacher of reading that I possibly can. Rasinski and Padak (2001) stated that it can be a major challenge to find effective ways to teach a child who is struggling to learn to read. However, they go on to emphasize that this can be one of the most enjoyable parts of the profession, because it is providing a tool the child will use for the rest of their life.

Future research needs to be accomplished on the connection that writing plays in a student's acquisition of reading. These two skills are completely entwined, as Calkins (1983) emphasized. A student will not succeed at one without being proficient in the other. It would be useful to see more research done on this topic, to further explore the connections between solid writing skills and comfortable reading techniques. Research on this topic will have the added benefit of improving communication skills in a world that is increasingly becoming interconnected.

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